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Maintenance

by

Timothy John Trapp

A Thesis Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1994

for Doreen

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to those people who have supported this project. My family, committee members Bob Bataille and Gary Tartakov. Steve Von Ruden for his technical assistance. John Madson and William L. Downard for their books, *Up on the River* and *Dictionary of the History of the American Brewing and Distilling Industries* respectively. Thank you to Steve Pett and Neal Bowers, and especially Mary Swander for her inexhaustible patience.

PART I

Leo Watches Water From The Highest
Point In Town

Children from the next county
camp on dolomite cliffs above the city
all summer. They show up
each year with parents
who look for work on the barges
and shout from seven
thousand feet at airplanes, ask
for food in front of the Savings Bank
downtown and climb
sandstone rock with flashlights.

The river hides a city gorged
on sunlight in its woven burrow
of elm and oak and concrete
parking ramps. The brewery,
hospitals, street lamps
on the water like a fleet of chanting
matches struck vertically
down an inland coast
light up homes in the cliff side
that slip a little each time the lights
come on, crack at the corners
a little each time it rains.
Foundations twist and bend
all summer into run-off streams
leaving shelves of rock
where spiders drink at raindrops
and reptiles sun their diamond tails.

Children know better, stay mobile
in dusty nylon huts, behind flannel
blankets used as storm windows
in the stray voltage
of eroding trees. Camping at night,
they bring water stored in old
milk cartons. They know
how long it will last
and how soon they'll have to leave.

Leo At The Ball Park

I live alone in a two room efficiency above
the tavern I clean every morning.
Thirty two years at the brewery
across town and ten cleaning earned me
free rent starting in '82 when
the Cardinals won the series.
It's a small place with a small gas stove,
a fold-out bed, and my autographed
picture of Henry Aaron on top
of the refrigerator. I finish up downstairs

and stick around to watch the Cubs,
play pinball for dollars with
the younger guys and bullshit with Dona,
the day bartender, until the night crowd
comes in. Dona doesn't like
her night replacement, calls him
"the kangaroo" because of how
he walks bouncing from foot to foot
straight up in the air.
I do the shake of the day
with pinball winnings, then go upstairs
to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes.

Outside my bathroom window I can hear
kids in the alley passing a joint,
buying and selling supplies for the weekend.
Sitting on the toilet tank, my feet
on its lid, I can pull
the shade and see everything.
Sometimes a fight draws a crowd
from the back of the tavern
and it lasts until someone is face down
in the gravel or the cops come.

When it rains the slow motion static
dropping from the roof sounds
like baseball on the radio, like summer
afternoons drinking cold beer
with the windows and doors wide open.
The Braves are in Milwaukee, Henry Aaron
leads the league, and I'm just starting out
on the can line hoping for my
spot in the Cellars and a January raise.

Bobby And The Bait Shop

Leo and me run a bait shop
down on the dock by the brewery
on weekends. It's a great spot
just up river from the diner
and marked by a gas
torch in back of the wash house.
It catches the eye from every
slough off the east channel.
We sell crawlers, minnows
and hellgrammites, cigarettes
and chicken livers.
We're open year round but do
most of our business in summer,
spend the time playing
cribbage under an old canvass
tent that blocks the sun
on hot days. Damn thing leaks
if you touch it when it rains,
lets snow melt on that yellow
table by the fish box.
Dock won't hold a refrigerator,
too weak, the gray lumber
worn out from holdin' us and our
old oak chairs. So we keep
bait in coolers the carp shop
made last spring.
Scrap insulation lines
a tin bed sittin' deep between
half inch plywood corners.
The boys that clean the lauter
tubs get done at 4am and hit
the water with as much
bait and beer as they can carry.
They yell, "Put it on the tab!"
trollin' out to the channel
and Leo always gives it to 'em.
I don't take that dog shit,
get the money later, tell old Leo
they stiffed us. He never
asks for it, and I don't say nothin'
else. Someday we'll run
the shop full time, buy tanks
for the minnows and new lumber
for the dock. Come retirement
I'm gonna buy me a flatbottom
and tie it to that old elm
up the bank, gonna
listen to the wash house hum.
The gas torch behind
me cracks like a flag in the wind.

Bobby Does Time

It ain't so bad, really. Sometimes
 it itches like a son of a bitch,
 but no one can see it
 under my pant leg anyway.
 No one looks at your feet, and if
 they do all they see is the bulge
 in my sock. Who'd of thought
 I'd get caught after twenty years?
 What do you do when you're sixteen
 and your girlfriend's
 knocked up and you got no job
 and mama and daddy spend all their
 time and money at the bar?
 Me and my brother, we ran clear
 out of state and only look back
 on Sundays. Brewery's the best job
 I ever had, sent me to school
 for my GED and didn't care about
 my record. And I didn't
 mind startin' out as a beer dumper,
 pourin' out stale overstock
 and misfilled cans. I like the sound
 of empties clickin' down
 the bottle chute. I ain't no
 different than anybody else,
 even them educated idiots in the office
 over next door. I asked
 the plant manager the other day,
 I said, "Hey Mr. Manager,
 how you doin' today?
 You go fishin' after work? I hear
 crappies are bitin' off the spoil banks."
 I says, "I go home after
 my shift just like you, sit around
 and watch TV. You do things
 a whole lot different than that?"
 This weight on my leg ain't dog shit.

Dona And The Florist

Guys from the brewery sell muskrats at our
farm up river. My old man
Artie skins the little
bastards in the tool shed and gives
about a dollar fifty per pelt, a buck
for the small ones. They call him "the florist"
because he loves his work
and talks as much as them old girls
downtown, you know? He takes
his time with each cut
and never scars a pelt.

He arranges the fur
on the clothesline at the west end of our
house in odd or even numbered lots
by shade of brown, thickness and overall size.
The yard is surrounded by elm trees,
the white underbellies of raspberry leaves
blink in the wind pulling light from flood lamps
over the tool shed at dusk.
Fifty-five gallon drums piled high with
carcasses shimmer in the copper air
and Artie sits on his blue cooler in his green
apron cutting them animals clean.
Blood gels under his fingernails, his hazel eyes
squint behind the thick-framed glasses
and strings of gray hair. Conibears shake
on the clothesline with the hides pinned
to hang like so many red bandannas.
He switches between beer from the cooler
and coffee from the house and talks
with who'll ever listen until every rat brought
in for that afternoon is skinned and the
meat stripped for smoking.

Bones
are boiled, then buried out by the gravel
pit. Leo and Bobby visit once a week
to sell their rats and to pick up meat
for break at the plant.
At noon they arrange the pieces on every
table in the lunch room while
them girls in the downtown shops cut
their tongues on baby's breath and broken roses.

Dona Talks Fishing

Leo picks his nephew up on cool, dark
mornings to fish walleye
at the lock and dam.
He works third shift and swings by
once a week all spring to bait
a hook and talk baseball,
brings his buddy Bobby and they talk
about work. The kid loses
interest in his jig.

"Years ago brewery
was a great place to work," says Leo.
"Honey wagon dumpers made as much
as guys driving lift truck
and beer was always in the coolers
for break." Leo and Bobby used
to stand next to the Filtec and pick
rejected cans off line #6
while its beer was still ice cold
and hadn't been pasteurized.
Everyone still goes to the warehouse roof
to watch fireworks launched across
the river from a park downstream on
Fourth of July.

Lightning travels
conduit and explodes into feathered
arcs that paint Leo's
nylon jacket with spinning prisms.
Late in the day the sun bends
across wing dams and over boats, folds
under pine oars and into 35 horse motors.
Leo and the kid drop Bobby off
at the tavern and go back to the dock
to watch the swollen summer rain.
They hope for lightning
and a glimpse of feathers under
the hidden smile of burning clouds.

Leo Starts His Shift

The best time of day is anytime
between shifts. People gone
to the tavern, hanging around
break room tables
telling stories over frozen
pizza and vending machine
coffee. Dock plates
rock trailer beds and dry leaves
scratch concrete on the shipping
floor. They're pushed

all the way to the keg room by
the air rotation system, kicked
through the plant from
the back of the building floating
past the production lines at eye
level until the overhead
doors are closed.

The line starts, roller bearings
pull bottles up the track
and everyone to their station.

The rotary labeler starts to spin
and I hear the bottles coming
with the dry leaves
like the chimes I make for my
back yard at home.

I cut old mustard jars into rings
at the shop and hang them
on monofilament line from
the fire escape off my bathroom
window. I hear them at

work when I'm reading my book
and watching the telephone,
and I think the best time of day
is anytime I can
come back and hear the chimes,
anytime I can watch those
leaves hanging in the air
like hand-picked notes of perfume.

Leo And Bobby At The Bar

"They pay us for the boredom."
 Bobby lets the last ball
 drain off the table
 and the machine goes through
 its routine of buzzers and bells,
 "GAME OVER" flashing above
 the overgrown eyes of fish
 that blink in rhythm
 with the letters B a s s C l a s s i c.

He picks up his spoon and tries
 a plate of hot cornbread
 and beans. "The filler
 on the can line has run straight
 since June and I been there
 to watch it every fuckin' night."
 Old tools, a cooper's mallet
 and bottom groover, sit on the back
 bar next to the glass
 case of beer steins tagged
 and typed to describe each piece,
 place of origin, design

and year made. Bobby knows
 them all, and when no one's around
 Dona lets him drink from his
 favorite, the one from Bavaria
 with an eagle's head handle
 and Bacchus riding a lion
 around the side of dull porcelain,
 weaving between party goers
 who toast him on each rotation.

Bobby lifts his stein and takes
 a drink, "Yeah, ain't no tools to use
 now. They pay us for
 the damn boredom and dog shit,
 for the smell of mash from
 the brew house and spinnin' cans,
 that constant noise.
 It goes on all night until
 you lose count and
 fall asleep or get too drunk to see."

Dona And The Girls Talk Shop

Lucy and Carol stop in the afternoons
before getting the kids from school
and do the shake, tell me
the latest from the plant.
Don't know how they work like that,
taking shit from jerks like Bobby.
But I guess the guys
ain't all bad. "Most of it's just
kidding around," Lucy says,
"I just don't know which way to take it
sometimes."

Carol thinks it's best
to laugh it off, to go along even
if it isn't funny and give
it back to the asshole. Like when
the bottle house foreman sold her lunch.
She got back, got on the horn
whenever his people made mistakes.
Bobby passes out on the john
after a long binge, Leo reads instead
of answering the phone,
sleeps between the stacks in shipping.
That's the foreman's responsibility,
ain't it? He can keep it.
Winter's the worst when everybody's
in a bad mood anyway.

Lucy and Carol
come in here on cold, sunny days
smelling like oil and metal and watch
the weak dancing of the river
just before it freezes. We listen
to the crack and bang
of expanding ice knowing
things get a little better all the time.

Bobby And Dona Talk Politics

"Yeah, you girls get treated like shit over there." Dona shoots her mouth off again. I can hear it all the way down at this end of the bar. She's been workin' here for years and still can't stop tryin' to get them women in the warehouse stirred up. I've heard it all before, "File a grievance," she says. "Get the union in on this thing." Carol and Lucy are always cryin.' Favoritism. Harassment. What dog shit. They're the favorites, get what they want every time. So what if they can't take a compliment or a little slap. "You girls can do any job there, just try and bump into the brew house," she says. Any job! They ain't got what it takes to do nothin' but drive lift truck, and they ought to be happy to have that. They're all queer anyways. I asked that Lucy Gund out before and she laughed, said to come back when I grew a pair, threw a torque wrench at me just 'cause I told her she looked fuckable. "Don't take that crap." Dona says. Yeah, well, we all take a little crap now and then, some just complain a little more.

Dona Tours The Tavern

The bar runs damn near the length
 of the room on the left as you
 come through the door.
 To the right is a pinball machine
 and a Skee-Bowl that nobody plays.
 A full length window extends
 behind the bar on the left side
 with one of them red neon beer signs
 flashing on and off. A lot of jokes
 get told about the floor.
 The red and black tile is worn
 through four separate levels down
 to the original wood.
 Leo says you can see all the way
 to the Civil War. A pool table
 is back by the johns. The men's room
 is right across from the back
 door of the bar.

On hot days when
 the back is open people on the street
 can watch the guys do their
 business if they're not careful
 about closing things up.
 One time Bobby went to take a leak
 and made a run for his truck
 when he came out, thought he could
 make it that few feet to the door.
 Boot met him before
 he could get his zipper up.
 They made a sight, the dog growling,
 tugging Bobby's drawers
 down around his ankles. His arms
 are swinging to keep balance
 and he's yelling, "Let go you god
 damn mutt, I ain't no fuckin'
 French fry!" I thought Artie would
 bust a nut laughing and I damn
 near pissed my pants,
 you know? Two guys walking by
 on break from the bank bought
 a round for the house and we had
 to put outside locks
 on the door, a railing up for the two
 and a half steps so people
 make it up and down without falling.

Bobby On Maintenance

She left last year, took the kids.
 She don't understand
 I had to work late every night
 at the engraving plant
 durin' lay off. They make
 auto parts on piece rate and what
 about down time
 when a shipment's due?
 "Whatever it takes," my foreman
 says. "Sleep here if you
 have to." So I took care
 of my machines and greased
 the gears, gibs, and leader pins,
 wiped down bedplates
 and filled the oilers.
 The register is double checked
 on every damn press
 in the department, flywheel
 belts looked at for tension.
 If I finish early I help
 maintenance thread pipe for water
 lines and join conduit.
 Liquid-tite gets cut to size
 to rewire injection molders
 and the tool shop mills new
 dies to tolerance.
 And there's always
 a "government project." We use
 the overhead hoist to pull
 an engine, rotate the tires
 on our cars. We make tree stands
 for deer huntin',
 golf clubs for spring, and
 on Wednesdays I rebuild
 dryer motors for
 the Laundromat downtown.
 So at home I like to work
 on refinishing the basement, have
 a few beers watching the ball game.
 She don't understand
 dog shit. I just laid new tile
 at our kitchen sink last summer.
 It's as if weather
 proofin' the deck, monthly flowers
 and nightly bed checks
 on the kids don't mean nothin'.

PART II

Leo Looks For Music

I like to watch the long-sandaled birds
in the marsh on my way
to the shop. Their liquid lines
remind me of my favorite painters,
of Irises and starry nights

and south pacific breezes. Water lilies
sprout wings and egrets fly off beaches
with blue petals and angular
plant stems held parallel
to the water in their crooked feet.
I watch the geometric purple curves,
branches that sink
opposite the wind and broken leaves
burning on tide pools, tumbling
over shallow trees and coontail.

The birds stand on thin reeds
in the muted dust of pregnant bells
and wind chimes, and
I remember how people used to make
instruments from the leg

bones of birds. The music settles
on sunflowers and river banks,
in towering thorns
and spiral poplars. I hear it drowning
in an oval darkness from my station
in the Cellars. It calls
for better paints, high water,
and the coffee-brown floods of spring.

Bobby On The Morning Shift

Dona drives her '78 Olds
in from Artie's farm to work
every mornin'.
She shacks up with him,
calls him the old man even
though she's ten years older.
Leo cleans the sinks,
stocks coolers and sets down
stools and chairs
before she gets there,
and then takes Boot
for a walk. She opens up
in time for the guys comin'
in off third shift
so they can have a drink
and play some dice, cards,
watch the mornin'
sports. I show up after
six to play pinball and bitch
about work. Leo comes
back with that damn
dog and we play for money
with some of the other guys.
Leo usually wins. Boot
lays around by the juke box
and watches Dona for signs
of dinner. His tail
thumps on the worn tile
every time someone
goes past him to the can.
I like black labs, but this one
don't like me. We stare each
other down on weekends
when Dona lets Leo bring
him down to the shop.
It's okay I guess, I don't have
to feed him or pick up
dog shit. And Dona takes
good care of all of us,
that's why Leo works here
and the rest
of us don't go nowheres else.

Leo Hears The Clock

We watch the river bounce past
in back of the wash house,
our bait shop marked
from the channel by a gas torch,
its pointed fingers flexing,
pushing shadows up
the alley to boil on the panels
of every trailer in the shipping lot.

A hundred yards downstream
and three blocks up
is the bus stop and the diner
we go to for lunch every
Saturday. Sometimes we get
food to go and eat
sandwiches and fries by the river
playing cribbage and feeding
Boot and the puddle ducks that
hang around the backwater.
I give credit to whoever wants it.
Kids, friends from the tavern,
the guys that clean
the lauter tubs who get
off work too early to hit the bank.
I help out now and then,

and Bobby collects everything later
anyway. At night the water looks
like wrinkled desert sand.
Old lumber leans against
the dock pilings and I wonder
if the place would be worth
running during the week, worth
running full time. Maybe put in
gas pumps. But then I don't
want to retire just yet,
I'd miss the Cellars, the smell
of stale hops. I'd miss break time
watching sparrows
outside the locker room window

with their powder-brown bellies
and dirty beaks bouncing,
picking seeds from the rain gutters,
their claws scratching and ticking
the minutes away on
the corrugated metal roof as closely
as any clock out on the floor,
as loudly as any torch or flame.

Bobby On The Trap Line

I get up at 4am to go check traps
with Leo. It's too damn early
for me, but I guess there ain't no other
way to do this kind of work.
Gotta get to the runs at day
break if we're gonna make it back
and get a good price from
Artie. We go to the shop and load
up fresh waxed conibears and some
burlap sacks, then take the boat
as far back in the marsh as we can
before we have to walk.
We check the jaw traps first, spotted
a mink run over in Miller's
slough. Don't set for fox in the hills,
but sometimes we go coon
huntin' out on the islands at night.
Drink whiskey and listen for
the dogs, spot back at the barges.
Them fuckin' rats are mean.
They don't always drown in the trap
and then you've got to club
'em over the head. Leo ain't too keen
on that. I do most of
the dirty work. He usually falls
behind and I have to come back
for him after I finish the deep water.
He'll be sittin' on the edge
of the boat in his waders watchin'
the river with that stupid look
on his face. I don't know what
in the hell he's thinkin'.
Don't ask. Hope he don't quit though,
I need a boat to get back where
the good runs are and he ain't
likely to let me take his out by myself.

Bobby and Boot At Lunch

I keep tellin' the fat old
mutt to stay away from me.
One day I even threw
him in the river.
Too bad labs can swim.
Can't say why in the hell
Leo brings him down
here, or why Dona lets
it happen. He just
lays around in the back
of Leo's flatbottom
watchin' deer flies crawl
across his nose and them
cream-shitters on
the other side of the slough.
He mooches food
and attention, distracts
customers. Only time he
moves is dinner time.
Damn mutt loves pickled
Northern. Sticks that gray
muzzle in my lap
the whole day if we don't
go over to the diner.
Even then he's the first
one in line for scraps
when we walk out the door.
Leo whistles him up
off his dead ass in front of
the building and tosses
him French fries all
the way down to the water
from a greasy paper bag.
The ducks have to settle
for what's left when
we get back. "He's good
for business." Leo says,
"It's good to have
a dog around, makes people
comfortable, makes
us different from sport
shops in town." Tell me
the last time you seen
a bait shop without some
mangy rug takin' up
space in front of the counter.

Dona Starts Work

Leo and Bobby sit down after a few
 games of pinball and drink their
 brains out all afternoon.
 It's raining too hard to leave and they
 can weasel a free pitcher off the last
 of the barrel. They ain't too
 proud to go home drunk in the middle
 of the day. By then I'm wiping down
 the back bar, dusting off the call
 booze, maybe cleaning
 the old beer steins. I keep one ear
 open knowing them two boneheads
 will sure as shit ask my opinion.
 Never heard two people complain
 so much about nothing.
 You'd think them guys were working
 every job in the plant by themselves,
 each one harder than the last.
 "Wish I had a gravy job like yours,"
 says Leo. "Fuck you." Bobby says.
 "Ain't nobody got it easier than you boys
 in the Cellars."

They go around
 until they're rested, then head back
 to their machine. It's all bullshit.
 I just do my dailys waiting
 for someone to ask me who's right.
 I say they're both full of it, don't you?
 The whole place is automated
 and there ain't much else
 to do but stand up cans on the line.
 They fall over coming off the depal
 and somebody has to get them straight
 before they hit the rinsers.
 I keep telling everyone it's them
 oversized bearings, but Bobby don't
 want to hear it, might
 lose his job. Leo don't do anything,
 listens for the phone so he
 knows which runs to send to the fillers.

Leo And Bobby Talk Jobs

1

The Cellars are mostly for storage,
but I know about making beer
because we get it done
on this end of the plant.
Guys in the bottle house count
and stand up cans, watch
the monitors. Barley
is malted in the brew house next
door, wetted down and ground
into meal. Tenders check
production lists for roasting,
let certain batches get
dark and warm like a fan of Arctic
clay then separate the runs by color.

2

Your first step into the dog shit
is the depalletizer over
in the warehouse. It's a big
son of a bitchin' green box
that takes cans and cardboard
sheets off pallets. An arm
sweeps empties onto
the line, suction cups lift
the cardboard. Good job, just cut
the bands and wrap off stock.
Never see the foreman.
I work in the tunnel. Time
of day don't matter
in there. Stand up cans
on the east end
of the track so they come six
across over at the bottle house.

3

Stainless steel mash cookers
mix meal with hot water.
Rakes and paddles in the tub
stir it up creating flow
and boil to filter and settle
solids, to move the liquid
over the walls and up the metal

sides into drain pipes.

4

Oblong rinsers wash out
them empties on the line.
Damn spray nozzles clog
and somebody has to lift
the hoods to clean
drains on break or at the end
of a run. Shit job then,
but mostly hour on, hour off
watchin' for crushed
cans and broken screens.
They scratch enamel
liners and tie up bearings.

5

The wort drained from mash
cookers goes into the copper lauter
tubs that stand in rows like great
drums. They separate
spent grain from liquid with
perforated bottoms
and rakes that create a filter
for the fluid on its way to the brew
kettles on an interlocking highway
of stainless steel conduit.
Switchyards and tunnels rinse
the leftover solids, the run-off
mixed with the wort for its sugars.

6

Filler tender takes the wrapper off lid
tubes so the seamer can slap
the fuckers on after the cans
are filled. Them things spin faster
than hell. Over a hundred silver
spouts shootin' beer. Ain't a bad job
if you like to drink. A guy can grab
a cold one right off the line.
If you're careful it won't
be too shook up. Only thing that sucks
is you have to find your own lids
at the warehouse. That means
drivin' lift truck. If you get
too messed up they'll send you home.

7

Hops get added at the wort boiler
 for flavor. Operators watch
 temperatures at the top of the vat,
 check fluid levels, the pressure
 controller and lag coils,
 watch the valves and Hop-jack
 while wort is strained and cooled,
 sediment sent through
 heated pipes outside that sound
 like spitting coals and fallen rain.

8

Filtec sounds like a fuckin' M-16
 on bad days. It kicks out
 cans if they're too light
 with a steel bar punching bad
 stock toward the middle
 of the machine on both sides
 of the line. Shorts go
 right to the can crusher.
 Damn thing don't quiet
 down until end of the weekend
 shift. I don't get no sleep.

9

Wort is pitched for fermentation.
 Yeast settles to the bottom
 of the tanks and white froth forms
 across the surface of the liquid,
 a thick cake of ocean
 foam over the working beer and gasses.
 Yeast separators, their cold
 wall jackets and spinning blades,
 make feed for the hog farmers
 and beer for storage in my Cellars.

10

Pasteurizer ain't no big deal.
 A long, wide box with a couple of decks
 to handle two lines at once.
 A double wide trailer with a roller
 conveyer runnin' through it.
 It's painted white, green, maybe blue
 dependin' on the line it helps.

Ain't a bad job to watch the monitors
 and set zone temps. Clean
 those dog shit screens and check spray
 nozzles for clogs if water
 volume drops. Not much to it.
 Back-ups go to the accumulation table
 when the palletizer's down.

11

The beer is drained to the Cellars
 for storage and sits four to six
 weeks while the alcohol
 content rises. Centrifuges take
 the yeast from the beer, big kettles
 with motors mounted out
 in front on the floor that whine
 the high pitched song of sediment
 filtering through trail lines,
 hammering and convulsing,
 echoing off the walls.
 The rooms are kept cold, so we
 wear insulated overalls like oilskins
 out on the river. The late shift
 racks making sure kegs
 filled at pressure won't pop a seam.

12

Traymore puts them plastic bands
 on the top of six packs and boxes
 up cases. It's green and round
 and does two sides sticking cardboard
 between rows of loose packs.
 Operator has to set
 the damn thing for the run, twelve
 count, twenty four count.
 After that he can sit still as dog shit
 and just make sure nothin' gets
 jammed. Sometimes they
 have to get their own case boxes
 from the warehouse. But mostly
 lift truck drivers will do it for a soda
 at lunch. They toss a pallet
 over lids on the way to the Filler.

13

Neoprene tubes that stick down into
the storage vats shoot CO2
through aging beer every fifteen
minutes. The stainless steel walls
whisper with the valves
and at night when it's quiet it sounds
like a million silent meetings,
each party busy and close
to someone's ear. That's when I like
it best around here,
don't have to worry about phone
calls or gages, just let machinery
do what it does and catch a nap or read.

14

Palletizer's smaller than the depal.
It's green and about the same
shape. Tender don't do much,
just fixes crooked units
and marks the end of each run
with a grease pencil.
They set the machine for pack
at the start of the shift.
Pallets get stacked at the front.
They're loaded with cases
and stretch wrapped
on the other end, banded and that's
about all she wrote. Nobody sits
around waitin' on a phone to ring.

Dona Finishes Her Dailys

Lucy and Carol come in about
 the time them two clowns get
 to whining about which
 job is best and what machine
 does the most work.
 "Here come the drivers now,"
 I say. I make sure everyone
 knows who's driving them
 lift trucks Bobby keeps bitching
 about. Carol knows how
 drunk he is and don't miss
 the chance to get in a few shots.
 I finish changing out
 the birdies in the women's john.
 "Hey Bobby," she says,
 "Are you ready to stand up cans
 tonight or are they
 going to stand you up." He
 mumbles something about
 real work and turns his back.
 He knows he'll get written
 up if they have to send him home
 again, but he don't give
 a shit.

Lucy don't say anything,
 afraid she'll lose her temper.
 "Hey Bobby," says Carol
 "Maybe you can put your liver
 up on the back bar with
 the pickled eggs." Bobby heads
 for the john and we all laugh
 except Boot who gets up from his
 nap and follows to make
 sure nobody goes to his truck.
 Leo moves down the bar
 to sit with Lucy. They've been
 good friends since she started.
 Some say it's more, but I
 don't listen to that shit. He's
 too damn old and she's too smart.
 Bobby comes out and falls
 asleep on the pool table.
 I wipe off the taps and mirrors
 after everyone leaves listening
 to rain stumble down
 the sidewalk. The electric click
 and slap of burning water
 runs off gutter coil into the street.

Dona On Leo's Shift

Hell, Leo gets on okay with everyone,
 even cardmen he knows will be gone
 at the end of the summer.
 Worst he can do is send the wrong
 stock to the fillers. He gets a warning,
 but the plant loves him because
 of the beer sales.
 Company can't sell a mixed batch
 so they give the stuff to the workers
 for less than cost.

Leo's worked
 damn near every job in the place so he
 can show anybody an easier
 way to do things, takes
 new people in and helps out when
 they have trouble out on the floor.
 He started out on the can line
 back when the company still made
 their own kegs and worked
 under the Brewery Workers Union,
 not the Teamsters. He lasted through
 the switch to mineral water
 and the strike in '72.
 Wife died three years later.
 Now he spends a lot of time at the bar
 or the bait shop, goes fishing with his
 daughter's kid.

Don't know why
 he hangs around with that worthless
 bastard Bobby. Nice guy I guess.
 I do know he pays off his
 tab and bills on time. He'll die in
 the break room with the smell
 of hops or down at the shop listening
 for birds. Someday we'll find Leo
 with the trees dragging
 their fingertips in the river and we'll
 know it's the end of the summer.

Bobby Goes Night Fishing

We fish bullhead and channel cat
 at night. Dona and Artie
 bring Boot and a couple bright
 red lawn chairs down
 to the bait shop
 dock. They dress in white
 painter's bibs and Dona wears
 a T-shirt, ties a lite jacket
 around her waist. Leo brings
 the beer and bug spray,
 his green Coleman lantern
 and one of them genuine Brewers
 caps he got signed
 by Gorman Thomas. Wears it
 for luck but it don't help,
 just keeps his bald head warm.
 Me, I supply the catfish
 pliers and bait. Long crawlers,
 some chicken livers,
 stink bait and rotten cheese.
 I got everything you need
 for catchin' bullheads and them
 big flat-headed fuckers.
 Everybody has to get their own
 tackle. After standin' cans
 for thirteen years I got fired
 for drinkin' at the brewery.
 Plenty of time to fish these days.
 I still go to the bar though,
 just not as often.
 Leo's gonna bump to first,
 and now after Dona and Boot leave
 I can drive home anytime.
 I ain't exactly on the street,
 got my 401K money.
 I still rebuild dryer motors
 with the tools here at the shop.
 Run into most everybody,
 even them damn women
 down to the bar in the afternoon.
 See Tom the pasteurizer
 tender at the V.F.W., and old
 "gut-pile" Harris from shipping
 buys his bait from us.
 Engraving plant will beg
 to have me permanent.
 All I have to do is get
 used to day shift and work
 punch press for the first six months.

PART III

Leo On The Warehouse Roof

Lucy and I go up on the warehouse
to watch the constellations
float within their prison of stars
and listen to box cars load for morning.
She comes along after stocking
the lines and we talk about work,
the kids. Bobby says she

and the other gals shouldn't be here,
don't deserve the same
kind of money we do because
of the breaks they get; always calling
in late with sick baby-sitters,
school meetings. I don't
really care, feel a little bad
about all the guff that flies around.

They do their job, it all pays and I
don't see the point in making
waves. Driving lift truck isn't all
that easy, especially when
bottle lines run and the shipping
bins are full. Nobody lets Bobby drive

anything anyway, even keep him off
the fillers as much as possible so he
can't get himself in trouble.
Sometimes I make it up here late
and find Lucy sitting on the west
side behind the roof units looking
out over the river. She can't handle
jokes like the others and needs

more time to cool down. The linkage
on passing trains fans light
from the shipping yard out onto
the water, wind-wrinkled
reflections and smoke that bend
with the current kicking newspaper
over scrub pine,
wrapping loose plastic around
fence posts and standing railroad ties.

Dona Watches Bobby's Sand Box

Bobby goes to his old lady's house
 on summer afternoons
 to get laid and drink gin. She threw
 him out a year ago,
 wouldn't you? Never home,
 always at work or at the bar.
 Still, she lets him in. She don't care
 what he wants as long as
 the kids can't see. The boy and girl
 play out back in a truck tire sand box,
 faces bloodied with chocolate
 and cookie crumbs. Their hands
 are busy with tin shovels
 and plastic pails building roads
 and ramps and trees and houses.
 They build glass office
 buildings and black museums,
 the post office and an auto parts store
 with tall pillars out front.
 Streets are filled with
 little people who travel the town
 waiting for gas. Some want
 movie tickets and a beer at the tavern
 next door.

Bobby watches
 his kids through hardware cloth
 on the windows, then goes home
 or down to the bar.
 The backdoor is unlocked,
 "You kids get in here for supper,"
 she says, washing her hands
 at the outside faucet. And the city
 crumbles under tiny bare feet.
 The August streets fall, vines and leaves
 wiggle. Thin air settles
 on the house and its sand box
 both cooking, crooked and round.

Leo Takes The Bus

People get off the bus in front
of the station next to
the post office and walk
the last three blocks
to work downtown. We move
in bouncing waves
past the river's bouncing water,
past the bank, the bars,
the old bakery and the even

older park filled
with walnuts and squirrels
and fine brown kindling
needles dropped from fine
brown pine trees
that bend and sing the cluttered
song of fishes like so many birds
in the sea. My careful

stammering cloaks the clicking
tongues of bats, an
ultrasonic romance
of mammal and wood and fish
and bird that
clings and shivers
with each mumbling lunge
of the buses behind us.

After work we wait by the post
office. People talk on
and off finding only time
between the distance
and the animals waiting,
always waiting
without saying a word
at the next stop on the route,
at the next tree
or stone, the next station door.

Bobby On Punch Press

Most people don't like punch press,
 but it don't bother me.
 Pretty god damn loud though.
 The cycle on every machine is a little
 bit different and the flywheel
 and dog make one hell of a racket.
 If the gibs aren't greased
 the ram creaks all the way down
 and pounds on the bedplate.
 Sometimes they get stuck
 and a die-setter has to come around
 with the bar and crank
 the head back up. Ear plugs are
 a pain. Always feels
 like you're underwater with them
 fuckin' things stuffed in there.
 But I like workin' ash
 tray lids on line #3. Them little
 L & J's are like toys and it's easy
 to make rate. The guard on the blank
 is loose but the foreman
 don't know it, so I can feed the press
 quicker by hand and don't really
 need restraint ropes.
 Don't know why they won't make
 me a die-setter. Hell, I can do
 as much with a press as these guys.
 I worked here at lay off
 and helped out on weekly maintenance.
 Besides, in all those years
 at the brewery I had to fix things
 myself more than once.
 "You'll make a good die-setter
 someday Bobby," the foreman
 keeps tellin' me, "Just keep them
 ropes on so I don't have
 to give you a write up." I say fine
 but I know he's bullshittin'
 me. He wouldn't make
 a pimple on a brewery worker's ass.

Dona And Boot Close Their Shift

Boot and me leave the bar
 at six o clock sharp.
 I like to get out of here before
 the kangaroo comes in
 and messes up all the work
 I did during the day,
 spend half the morning fixing
 his mistakes. The till's off
 most of the time but I ain't
 one to snitch, and he
 ain't smart enough to keep
 it up for too long
 without getting caught.
 The first shift guys start
 to wander out the door
 and I get one of them to help
 change barrels, restock
 the coolers. Bobby
 wants to leave, so we take
 his keys. He kicks a little
 but settles down quick.
 Boot gives him hell
 if he tries to get to his truck,
 knows when he's too
 drunk to drive.

On Mondays
 we stay for the people
 to come and clean the lines,
 wipe beer snot out
 of the trays. I use up a few
 drink chips bought for me
 during the shift. We wake up
 Bobby and I give him a ride
 home or to the shop,
 depending on the time of day.
 Sometimes I just
 leave him to sleep it off
 and race my lazy dog to the car.

Leo At The V.F.W. Dance

The elderly dance in lighted windows
across the river. I see them
tipping with the waves
in one small corner of reflection,
a quiet rotation of water and feet
surrounding the floorboards
and shingles of the lodge.

The potluck finished, people
do dishes to a waltz
while some men drink beer
and play cribbage out on the dock.
A gal in a yellow floral print asks
the man who sits
alone to dance and they tread water
on the tip of a needle point
in the open shallows outside

the shop door. Shadows know
the steps and my eyes
watch their shoes.
She tells him he looks nice in his
uniform. He looks like my uncle
who used to go to these things
after his wife died. Back then I liked
to watch them dance, but today
I close the window.

Smoke from the shanty stacks
down river slips under
the front door. It circles the room
and keeps everyone moving.
My uncle takes me along
for the night and the warm
pine and smell of creosol
stains my shirt when I lean on the wall.

Bobby Shovels The Dock

Gettin' snow off the dock in winter
sucks dog shit. Thrower can't
make it down the steps and if we don't
shovel ice creeps inside the shop.
It collects in the hinge
pockets of the cabinet doors,
people slip. Leo's too damn old to do
it so I get the call, get it over with early
before work and after
we check our traps durin' the week.
Dock chains are froze in the water
but it don't matter.
Most guys walk or drive up
as soon as the ice is thick enough.
It's awful damn slow this
time of year though, people have
shacks and stay put out in the channel
or in the backwaters by
the dam, don't travel the sloughs
much. Most boathouses are closed
up until spring. Nice thing
is that it's quiet. No ducks, Leo goes
home for a nap and Boot
is still asleep out at the farm.
I got early fisherman
and a few dead rats for company.
If I shovel the short way on the dock
but with the planks it goes fast,
but ice still collects in
the joints when the railings glaze over.

Leo And The Clipper Ship

A circle of white pelicans
coasts above soybean
fields and the gravel lot
of the engraving plant where
Bobby works.
It follows an intersecting

angle of symmetrical
arcs that stagger
and hang over quiet fences
and red-worn
barns. The birds nod

and fall swimming like
a ship, sails full and flowing
with tilted wings,
rowing feathers rising
in flat waves that cool

in the deep green
leaves between warehouse
windows, in rainbow pools
of acetylene that
crumble in a tangled wake
like the broken
keel of a clipper ship.

Once on the ground each
pelican walks very
carefully. Between
the factory and the ripening
beans they have

no form. They have
no means without the wind
and watch the
wobbling stars for direction.

Dona Lets Bobby Do Business

Bobby comes into the tavern
 on Thursday afternoons
 to sell tip boards on Sunday's game.
 He used to work punch press
 in the industrial park
 until the guttural popping
 of bone and metal sent him
 pacing in circles hugging his left hand
 to his knees. The twelve
 ton L & J that took his fingers
 cycled out spitting bits of flesh
 and blood over the bedplate
 onto the belts,
 the walls, and the operator
 who sat staring into space
 as if he were the one in the machine,
 the one doing a jig
 at the center of a circle of curious
 friends.

Now he makes his
 way down the bar each Thursday
 leaning into each occupied stool.
 A blue stocking cap
 is pushed up on the crown of his head
 and a Packer jacket
 slides off his right shoulder.
 "Come on you assholes," he says.
 "Two bucks a pull pays
 twenty a quarter and double
 on double numbers."
 He never pays, but we buy our tickets
 from Bobby. We laugh when
 he bounces off the sidewalk cracks
 to another bar
 and wince when he crosses traffic.
 Sometimes he hangs around
 and passes out
 on top of the pool table,
 his feet dangling from the end
 where the balls roll down.
 Sometimes when I look at his shoes
 they step in pace with the jukebox
 and I can see Bobby dancing
 on the production
 floor, the janitors pulling
 on their gloves to fill
 the bright red Biohazard bags.

Leo Takes The Boat Out

Thought I'd get the boat cleaned up
for the season, get it looking
good for the channel
and its blinking waves. It's a little
early yet, but she's an old
gal made of oak, ash and pine,
and the hull needs to be cleaned
and painted before she can
go in the water. Besides, it won't be
long before redwing blackbirds start
flashing, then it'll be time
to break out the surface lures

for bass and bluegill. Bobby lets me
keep the boat in his garage
and he'll be at the tavern by now.
He goes in as soon as he can get up
in the morning since the accident.
I told him not to drink before work,
that running a machine was
different than standing
up cans. But there he'd sit right
in the parking lot of the plant
drinking beer in that beat-up truck,
the Ford logo hanging loose
on the one side and leaking oil.
Even if the interlock on
the press wasn't working the whole
thing was his fault, reaching in like
that, taking his ropes off.
Won't get a lot done on the boat today,
pull the cover and clean out
the inside, old beer cans, bait cups,
a grub sack and my waders.

I can't wait for spring, Bobby should
be working again and I'll be retired,
promised Lucy I'd take her
and the kids out through the sloughs,
maybe camp on a sandbar.
We can anchor and watch
the barges far away from Bobby
and the backwaters, away from those
ponds where smartweed clogs
the stillborn pools around shore
and water beetles roll
and boil like flies over an open wound.

Dona Plans A Party

Leo retires after the New Year so I thought
 I'd get a party together to celebrate.
 It ought to take our minds
 off Bobby. I seen him again last week
 all messed up with his Packer
 jacket on. He must have been nuts, sticking
 his hand in there instead
 of using the wand. He could have called
 a die-setter, but he had to try and do
 it himself. Skinny little bastard's too smart
 for his own good. But he's pure gristle,
 ain't he? Anyway, I plan
 to get Artie to help put up a few decorations,
 put a hat on Boot. Lucy and Carol can
 bring some food. A banner
 on the opposite wall over the jukebox would
 work out okay, and maybe
 something over the pool table in back.
 I can have the vendor put free credits
 on the pinball machine.

Don't see as much
 of them guys anymore. Leo comes down
 but don't stick around like he used
 to, spends his time doing lite maintenance
 at the shop. He shovels the dock
 and scrubs the cook-out tanks,
 walks the railroad tracks staring
 at the water. Bobby hangs out at the till
 drinking beer. I like watching the river
 from those sandstone cliffs
 above the city. Reminds me of my kids.
 You can feel the current under
 the ice, a pitch-black plain of hollow crests
 and whirling white ribbons,
 of swollen indigo moons and sinking bones.
 In cold weather like this the channel
 hides the light of winter rainbows.
 It tickles the banks and buoy signs
 coating the steel
 and concrete feet of bridges with a slow frost.

Leo and The Fishermen

At dawn I look at the frozen river,
 water and ice rising
 and falling in a mottled
 night sky. A boy waves
 at fishermen through a thousand
 years and torn mittens,
 looks content in his
 round blue coat to lie face down
 smoothing snow, polishing the ice

with his scarf. Counting bubbles
 in the clouded lens,
 he studies suspended capsules
 of air, planets turning tangled
 under heavy lamps
 that scroll to a shatter
 in the deep, willowy currents
 and kicks out opaque pockets
 with his heels like I did
 on that same spot years ago.
 Fishermen look up from luminous
 pools and dark tents ready to run
 to baited tip-ups at
 the sound of cracking ice.
 Flags go up, the boy slides as far
 as he can on tread-worn
 boots to the edge of open water.

I sit for hours watching them
 from the bait shop,
 the boy and the fishermen.
 Their gray shadows block the sun,
 block the coiled dock chains
 wrapped around decaying wood.
 I lift myself down
 railroad tracks in the breath
 of street-lined winter mornings,
 through empty
 boxcars given up for lost.
 The river runs beside me
 and I thumb the holes in my glove.